

Friday, May 18, 2007

Wednesday, April 18, 2007

I attend a breakfast with Susan Rice, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State. The topic is Darfur.

400,000 innocent people have been massacred in Darfur; and today, nearly 2 million are packed into displaced persons camps. People are murdered, women are raped, children are kidnapped, villages are leveled and violence is rampant. The United Nations has passed resolutions calling for peacekeepers. The President of the United States has called what is happening in Darfur "genocide."

And the regime in Sudan has empowered it all. They have armed the Janjaweed forces that are scorching villages. They have tested the will and the patience of the world. They have made promises to allow U.N. peacekeepers into Darfur and then broken those promises. They've pledged to end the genocide but have allowed it to continue. They've continued to delay while an entire population dies.

Why should we care? Not only because it is our moral obligation (as someone who is Jewish, I frequently ask myself what I would have done if I were in Congress during the Holocaust), but because this is a national security challenge. Tomorrow's terrorists are living today in areas of chronic instability, violence and chaos. And few places on earth more vividly demonstrate those conditions than Darfur.

At breakfast, the former Assistant Secretary of State mentions an idea briefly. She notes that there is an airbase in Chad, one hundred miles from Darfur, called Abéché. If the United States would help Chad upgrade the Abéché airbase for genocide relief operations, she suggests, it would send an important message to the Sudanese leadership: we will not continue to sit idly by and allow genocide to unfold. The airbase could be used for humanitarian purposes – to ship medicine and other emergency supplies. It could also be used to facilitate the transport of United Nations peacekeepers and NATO operations.

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The idea strikes me as something worth pursuing. It answers, in part at least, my question about what I would have done if I was in Congress during the Holocaust. I direct my staff to research the idea and prepare legislation authorizing upgrades for the airbase. I suggest that they contact Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA), about cosponsoring the amendment. Among Democrats, she leans to the left on military issues and I am more moderate. She is also a leader on issues relating to the genocide in Darfur. I believe it would send a strong message that, on this issue, we are a united Democratic caucus.

Thursday, May 10, 2007

The Democratic Leadership announces that the House will vote on the authorized budget for the entire Department of Defense the following week. I decide to try and amend the bill with language expressing the will of Congress to help Chad upgrade the Abéché airbase. The amendment would direct the Department of Defense to evaluate how those upgrades should be made and to evaluate the associated costs. My staff consults with the House Armed Services Committee staff, the Congressional Research Service, and advocacy organizations such as Save Darfur.

Friday, May 11, 2007

I land at LaGuardia Airport after a busy week in Washington. Almost immediately after I return to my house, my staff calls. They have arranged for me to speak with Chad's Ambassador to the United States about the idea. They have advised me that the government of Chad's consent is important in building credibility for my amendment. From my backyard, as my dog barks at a neighbor and an Ice Tea melts on the table, I am transferred to the Ambassador. He tells me American support for any upgrade of Abéché is "the best news."

Monday, May 14, 2007

The House Legislative Counsel has drafted our amendment. We circulate it to the Democratic and Republican professional staff members on the Armed Services Committee. They offer bipartisan support for the bill if we tweak some language. We clear the first hurdle, but have many more ahead.

Tuesday, May 15, 2007

My staff reports that the major Darfur advocacy organizations are supporting my amendment. This further adds credibility, but the first major obstacle still awaits: the House Rules Committee.

No amendment may be debated on the Floor unless the House Rules Committee approves its consideration. Hundreds of amendments to the DoD Defense Authorization have been filed, and my staff is told that the Rules Committee is rumored to be accepting about one out of every nine.

5:45 p.m. - I am summoned to the Rules Committee to defend my amendment. In a small room off the House chamber, Members rotate in and out of seats at a table facing the Members of the Rules Committee at an imposing dais.

"Mr. Chairman," I begin, "I will be brief."

"That would be good," says Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL). "Your amendment might have a better

a chance."

I take three minutes to explain my amendment. And when the Chairman asks whether there are any questions, there is silence.

As we walk through the Capitol, I tell my aide: "When there are no questions, it means that you either did a great job and the amendment will be cleared for the Floor. Or, you did a horrible job and no one wants to waste time asking questions. When there are lots of questions, it means there's going to be a debate on the Rules Committee and no one knows what will happen. I think we did okay."

Wednesday May 16, 2007

9 a.m. - My blackberry informs me that mine was one of fifty amendments the Rules Committee is sending to the Floor for debate. I am told to be prepared to defend the amendment at any point during Wednesday afternoon, Wednesday evening, after midnight, or Thursday. I assume it will be very late into the evening and focus on other issues during the course of the day.

6 p.m. - Only a few hours into the debate on the defense budget, my Legislative Director barges into my office. "They're ready for you on the Floor." I quickly type some thoughts, grab my notes and head to the House Chamber.

House Armed Services Chairman Ike Skelton (D-MO) is managing the Democrats on the Floor and Republican Ranking Member Duncan Hunter (R-CA) is managing the Republican time. The Rules Committee has granted my amendment a total of twenty minutes of debate time, divided evenly by both parties. I have been assured the Republicans will not oppose my amendment. Still, the only thing that is predictable on the House floor is the unpredictable.

I stand at a microphone, and hear the Speaker say: "For what purpose does the gentleman from New York rise?"

"Mr. Chairman, I have an amendment at the desk." I respond, according to parliamentary scripting.

I am recognized. FOR THE CONGRESSIONAL RECORD TRANSCRIPT OF THE FLOOR DEBATE ON REP. ISRAEL'S AMENDMENT, [CLICK HERE](#) .

I open my remarks, then yield time to my cosponsor, Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA). Ranking Chairman Hunter states he will not oppose the amendment, comments favorably on it, and asks some questions.

Then, to my surprise, he makes an offer: let's try to expedite a shipment of relief supplies to Abéché before July 1st.

I yield time to Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX) and announce that I am prepared to close the debate.

As I conclude, I hear Rep. Hunter: "Will the gentleman yield?" he asks.

"I'll yield to the gentleman."

Rep. Hunter reiterates his offer that we contact non-governmental organizations to assess the feasibility of sending relief supplies through Abéché soon. I agree to work with him, and yield back the balance of my time.

The amendment passes by unanimous voice vote. It is now formally in the Department of

Defense annual authorization, and on its way to the Senate.

Will it end the genocide in Darfur? No.

Is it part of an overall global response that opposes genocide? Yes.

Just as important is the fact that with all the focus on partisan squabbling, this is a shining example of Democrats and Republicans standing together in unanimous commitment to the victims of genocide. What started as an idea a few weeks ago has become legislation passed by the House.

Friday, May 18, 2007

7:30 a.m. - I am at the USAir Terminal in Washington, waiting to catch a flight to New York. Standing nearby is Rep. Hunter, scanning the flight monitors.

I approach him and thank him for supporting my amendment.

"Hey," he says, "I've made some calls on this. I want to keep working on this with you."

We agree to have our staffs research the next steps. Even if we are unable to get a shipment into Abéché in the immediate future, I have the satisfaction of knowing my amendment heads to the Senate with strong bipartisan support. If it passes in the Senate, it will go to the President as part of the United States defense budget. And I hope for the good of this country the President does not veto our bill.

HOW AN IDEA BECOMES A LAW: AN AMENDMENT ON DARFUR

May 17, 2007

I board my flight for New York. Rep. Hunter flies elsewhere. But on this issue at least -- standing up against genocide -- we are heading in the same direction.